

Paper Presentation: Panel; De-Signing The City: Where lies the Art of it?
TUESDAY | 1 JULY 2008
IAPL 2008 GLOBAL ARTS / LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

M a r k J a c k s o n

S T O P S I G N

I n t r o d u c t i o n

From the moment I sent off the abstract for this conference presentation to Professor Grierson many months ago I have had a little regret on so hastily choosing the exclusive Benjaminian theme that I outlined, and particularly regretted the clipped title "Stop Sign." It was too abrupt, too little in its saying, too much of a caesura. It stopped short. Its signature was halting. This disease was entirely allayed, however, just a couple of weeks ago when I uncannily encountered one of the recent books in the flood of Derrida studies: *Derrida's Legacies: literature and philosophy*, edited by Simon Glendinning and Robert Eaglestone. The cover image is a photographic work taken by Hugo Glendinning in 1995, titled *Road Works, Death Valley*. Clearly not an image of the metropolis, it is an image that powerfully and poignantly signs the civil or the civic, or the civility of the human on the verge of sublime nature.

Not a building in sight, it is true, but the image defines the work of building: a two-lane blacktop in the middle of nowhere in a one-point perspective gaze to the desert horizon, with a road construction worker in the left foreground looking to the verge, waiting pensively or bored; a temporary stop sign blocking the through pass of non-existent traffic; a do-not-pass sign placed beyond the stop sign. The enigma of this stop sign that takes on the imprimatur of signing a text on literature and philosophy, the impassability of the name's proper naming except in the legacies of its over-naming as well as the savage contrast between the human and nature raised to the visual interpellation of profane illumination revealed to me what I was clearly overlooking in my initial proposition: contingency and accident as the play of necessity.

About two months ago the distinguished British academic and new Vice Chancellor of Liverpool University, Sir Howard Newby, was the guest of the Auckland University of Technology to discuss with the university aspects of its strategic planning and direction. Newby made a number of pertinent comments entirely germane to the overarching themes of this conference panel, and in the context of my university in relation to the strategic planning of the city of Auckland. While this paper will not be going into details on these issues, I want to briefly reference them as concerns that my paper considers as essential contexts. Newby discussed the now global contexts of a discourse that emerged particularly around the beginning of the millennium, referenced in the outline of this panel theme, concerning knowledge economies and the role of universities in knowledge economies.

We may remember a powerful though pessimistic critical discourse of the university in the early 1990, that emphasised the extent to which universities had failed in their emancipatory bid to achieve precepts inherited from the enlightenment. Indeed, during the 1990s universities were very much in need of being determined differently within a governmentality of the state. By the millennium they had found this in a radical inversion of a fundamental questioning of their legitimacy, from universities as protected sites of the generation of an emancipatory autonomy, to universities becoming key drivers in knowledge economies, in particular with respect to knowledge and technology transfer and exchange. That is to say, a fundamental shift can be seen to have happened, from a concern with a question of autonomy as a question of emancipatory politics, to a question of instrumentalism with respect to the will-to-truth.

Newby also emphasised that in Britain investment in universities was seen as a strategic investment in economically depressed cities. In his terms, each depressed city in Britain wants firstly a football team, and secondly a university. Universities, located in the centres of cities, are seen as a pivotal spur to economic development built on the ruins of industries that have migrated to cheaper and more efficient labour markets. A small compensation, perhaps, is that those same labour markets offer these same cities raw materials for the education industries in the form of international students, truly a knowledge economy transfer. Certainly, in New Zealand one cannot directly find a parallel here except on a very micro scale. Though we do note that within the prefatory comments for this panel, Melbourne is distinguished as a “knowledge capital” of Australia on the basis of its university sector. And in Auckland, in what is now a complex project of defining a sectorised city of creative industries, the two city based universities constitute the economic viability of an education sector, while university research and teaching programmes recognise this branding of Auckland as a city of creative industries as a spur to maximise knowledge transfer with cashed up stakeholders and central government funding devoted to the smart technologies of value adding, usually focused on digital processes termed “creative.”

T e r r i t o r y P o p u l a t i o n S e c u r i t y

But nothing I’m saying here is very startling, and it is already about forty years since Andy Warhol made the banal though pressing observation that the department store has become the art gallery and the museum the department store. While things have moved on they have not really changed direction. No shortage of art while the cities keep growing. Although this panel topic concerns directly the city, and none of us are confused about being in one at the moment, and we all understand Newby’s engagement with universities as city rejuvenators, I’d like to add some complication to our understanding of what we mean by “city” in such a way that we can begin to offer some correlation between an analytics of the city and a questioning of aesthetics, or the art-work. That is to say, we can begin to broach directly the thematic for this panel. Neither discourse on the city nor on aesthetics is homogeneous. And there is some genuine complexity as to how we engage them. This discussion will hopefully open to the key concerns I have identified with Benjamin with respect to language, translation and the profane that I would want to approach in terms of a politics of time.

In his 1978 lectures at the *Collège de France* Michel Foucault discussed three discourses and mechanisms of power that have come to define our understanding of the city: juridico-legal structures, disciplinary mechanisms and the apparatus of security. They date from the 16th century and we find the emergence of disciplinary mechanisms from juridico-legal structures

when the predominant concern of government shifted from the control of territory and things within it to the individuating of populations, a shift in the formation and consolidation of cities understood in the emergence of medical and juridical discourses that determined regulations concerned with construction and planning, when it was recognised that national wealth was not determined by an inventory of the things a nation held but rather by the productivity of its population. The third mechanism, in apparatuses of security, emerges in the nineteenth century as governmentality moved from the spatial problems of confinement associated with disciplinary mechanisms to the temporal problem of planning such that statistics or an inventory of the state increasingly became concerned with forecasting based on the establishment of norms, normativity and normalisation as the key concerns of good governance. It is not that the discourses of territory and discipline withered in this. Far from it, just as the concern with territory and population maintained their hold on definitions and discourses of the city in a way that enabled the productivity of relations of power at the level of techniques of normalisation. Clearly education from the 19th century was an absolute key and remains a key *pace* universities as drivers in today's knowledge economies, with a governance that affords key stakeholder interests as the driving recipients of taxation concessions for smart knowledge transfers. If a key complexity today with respect to the city is one of aggregations in an understanding of cities in a continuum of the local and the global, via a problematic of the region and non-place, this would be assayed in Foucault's terms by the extent to which technologies and discourses of power engage in a normalisation of human practices that has never lost sight of the efficacy of surveillance mechanisms of discipline and juridico-legal mechanisms of right whose primary target is the secured and healthy individuated body.

However, this analytics of city governance would engage us only part-way in addressing the question of de-signing the city. We would want to develop some correlations between key discourses of the mechanisms or technologies of power concerning territory, population and normalisation, and discourses of aesthetics. Would such correlates be possible?

D e s i g n L a b o u r t h e U n c a n n y

Hence we are aware of Kant's pivotal significance for modernity's engagement with the work of art in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, Hegel's legacy in his emphasis on labour and Heidegger's turning to the unworkability of the work. These three paradigmatic frameworks for approaching the work of art constitute something like three fundamental discourses in the sense that Foucault identifies territory, population and security. Clearly, there is no claim of correspondence between each of these three as if an isomorphism existed between them; however, the Kantian, Hegelian and Heideggerian discourses are all equally in operation in a governmentality of the artwork and in the relational milieu of contemporary discourses of the artwork. With Kant, we recognise his emphasis on the *sensus communis* in an ethics of the artwork as a mimetic design of God's work where the communitarian injunction of the "as if" with respect to the universality of the work of art becomes, for Kant, the very fundament to communitarian projection. The state builds its culture on nothing less than this impossible universality, this impossible possibility. Hinged as it is for Kant on there being exemplary works of art that serve as a guide, we recognise the connivance between the institutional frameworks of the metropolitan centres for culture building and the implicit normativity that establishes the state-sanctioned museum as an educative technology of power.

If for Kant judgement always already resides in the court of reason and hence implies a juridico-legal ground, for Hegel reason is more a motor that moves us. Hence, the slave mentality of the bourgeoisie sublates the non-recognition of the master through labour, which is to say through giving form to unformed matter, through creating in the stuff of nature the individuated signature of identity. There is no work or product in the great design of nature, no mimetic faculty of nature perfected. Human labour is the originary font of the work of art. Of course, the artwork will be a passing phase in the restless cunning of Reason. However, discourses of the artwork have tenaciously held fast to the authorial functioning of putting spirit to work in matter, and the dominance of the question of form, even, or perhaps particularly, where the artwork has since the mid 20th century become the question of a time of the work. It is Heidegger who has presented a radical engagement with both the Kantian and Hegelian paradigms in a questioning that has as yet to my mind to be genuinely explored. Evidence to date rests with Maurice Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida in particular. If with Hegel we engage the dialectic of the particular and the universal, we may equally read here the question of individuated identity and the masses, subjectification and population, that Walter Benjamin will come to understand as the dialectic-at-a-standstill of the mass individual. We might also consider this in terms of Foucault's work on subjectification in practices of normalisation through power's production of knowing subjects. And with Heidegger we engage the radicality of ecstatic temporality, or the primordially of temporality as a horizon of disclosure to the being of beings. Heidegger encounters the artwork as that disclosure of our being in the world that reveals the materiality of the world not as the matter that is used and used up in the labour of form-making, or in the standing reserve of technological production that "challenges-forth" what is, but rather as the unworkability of this materiality not as that which resists fashioning into usable things, as if the unworkable is a negation of labour. Rather this disclosure is that which radically opens our world of things to us. Heidegger will call it a "bringing-forth" he recognises in the pre-Socratic understanding of "*poeisis*." It is something outside of labour as such. We turn, in fact, to Benjamin for a closer understanding.

L a n g u a g e T r a n s l a t i o n t h e P r o f a n e

So, on the one hand I have outlined something like a necessary critical programme of analysis that would engage with the city as a juridico-legal mechanism at the level of territory and things to be governed, as a spatial mechanism of design, where design is predominantly understood as a technology of power concerned with correlates between population and individuation: how to segment and make productive as a positive injunction to happiness. The third concerns probability and risk. How do we foresee what we needed to have done such that we minimise the cost incurred in not knowing? Will to truth as will to power. With Benjamin we recognise immediately an engagement with the question of identity inextricably linked to a question of the metropolitan as an aesthetic experience. Clearly, Benjamin does not discuss things at all in terms of a correlating agenda I have established. However, he does lodge the artwork not as something in addition to the city that would add to it, or where it would be missed were cities to abandon a civilising mission, not as a task we would have in the progress of emancipation and civility, but rather the artwork is lodged in a primordial engagement of being human in its correspondences with nature that would escape all calculation and labour. In this, and despite their profound and irreconcilable differences, Benjamin and Heidegger have an uncanny resonance. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility" is now a well-known essay and I will not spend time with it

except to emphasise the extent to which it turns to a radical understanding of the city as the political aesthetics of profane illumination brought about by a technology that temporalises the immediacy of experience as an optical unconscious. This same technology may equally, as an aesthetics of politics, lead to fascism. How would we understand the difference?

There are two lines of engagement with Benjamin to explore with this. One line concerns his understanding of language, developed in a series of essays, but for our purposes, most usefully assayed in his essay "Task of the Translator." The other line of engagement, intersecting with this, is the "logic" or dialectic of redemption that Benjamin invokes in all of his texts, with respect to the aura, the loss of the aura and redemption, or the sacred, the fall from the sacred, and redemption from that fall in profane illumination. Let us engage with the second one first, as it opens to the primordial concern of Benjamin with language "as such." The many dialectical constructions engaged with by Benjamin have no synthetic moment. They are "dialectics at a standstill," to quote the title to the editor's essay accompanying the publication of Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*. For Benjamin we have been abandoned in the fall from paradise, from the realm of the sacred. Redemption from the profane world of experience is not on the path of return to the sacred; we will not have a sublation of this dialectical negation in a return or annulment of their opposition. Rather, redemption happens in the awakening from the dream of the sacred, in a return to the profanity of the profane, awakening to the recognition that the sacred always already was profanity, and that it is only in the profane that we arrive at redemption.

Benjamin's diagnosis of his contemporary culture suggested that something fundamental to experience of one's existence as that which construes cohesiveness in cultural memory is in decay. Experience becomes something fundamentally partitioned between private, disjointed and non-communicable events, constituting elements of individual repression, and objective existence, inter-subjective but meaningless to an individual. This is the condition of the mass-individual, capitalism and commodity culture, where aesthetics, or concern with the beautiful is also a commodity and hence for Benjamin there was no point in differentiating between the art work and advertising with respect to a former tradition's understanding of the autonomy of art. It is in this condition of decay, of the fall, that Benjamin construes another account of a fall, that of aesthetics itself as it may be mobilized by fascism.

The epitome of the auratic work is the masses as monument to war and death, and the mobilization precisely of photography and film in the aesthetisation of politics. In the profanity of this Benjamin sees redemption, the messianic, the utopian dream, or rather the masses awakening from the dream to the recognition of the dream as dream, to the dream as such. Technicity, reproducibility and the tactile are the profane elements by which the sacred will be redeemed. It is here that I suggest reading between this essay and his essay on the task of the translator is illuminating. The latter essay, in fact, commences with a pivotal comment on the work of art: "In the appreciation of the work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference to a certain public or its representatives misleading, but even the concept of an "ideal" receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art, since all it posits is the existence and nature of man as such. Art, in the same way, posits man's physical and spiritual existence, but in none of its works is it concerned with his response. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener."

Benjamin will frame the essay on translation along the lines of asking what translation would be in its essence if not primarily for a reader. And, in a repetition of his concerns with origins and reproductions, or with decay and the fall, he will approach the original work and its translation according to a problematic of profane illumination. The authentic relation between an original and its translation is that of essential correspondences between languages that reveal, not the transmission of meanings from language to language, but pure language, language as such. Fidelity in translation comports itself to this essence. Within the orbit of the artwork essay one may detect contradictions: extolling against pure art, Mallarmé shifting ground from authentic exemplary to inauthentic. In the task of the translator there remains the aura of the sacred. But then, the artwork essay is not the last work. The translator text serves as an introduction to a translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*. Benjamin's late writing on Baudelaire reinaugurates a notion of the aura precisely in the hidden correspondences it reveals such that the play essential for redemption has its potentials: "The experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a form of response at home in human society to the relation of the inanimate or nature to men." Such correspondences are unconscious relations of the human to nature, explored for example by Benjamin in his early essays on language as a mimetic faculty. Thus, "There must be a human element in things which is not brought about by labour." If Benjamin's Artwork essay was concerned with a certain loss of aura, this aura concerned an essential spatiality of the near and the far, of proximity and place. Profane redemption from this loss happens in the medium of a temporal work. In cinema there is the "dynamite of the tenth of a second" that blows apart what was previously contained and locked in. This redemption reveals a politics of time. If the "Task of the Translator" suggests a new aura, explored in Baudelaire's Paris, it is not a return to the near and far of a spatiality of aura, or to confinements, disciplinary spaces and segmentations of populations, but rather to a temporality of being human revealed in the mimetic faculty of an optical unconscious, in Benjamin's terms, or an ecstatic temporality in Heidegger's. Such a politics of time engages a question of the de-signing of the city, not from the viewpoint of a spatiality that inheres in any semblance of a graphematics, graphology, form giving or trace-inscription, writing in its most general sense. Rather, such a politics of time engages with the "now-time" of Benjamin's shock of recognition, the profane redemption of what has been in the light of a future to come. If we infer such an engagement offers radicality, it is not because it has fundamentally displaced an auratic spatiality for an auratic temporality. After all Foucault has already made clear that in as much as security displaces disciplinary mechanisms, it is fundamentally a temporality of what is to come.

Yet key to the political aesthetics opened by Benjamin, and indeed by Heidegger for example in *The Ister*, is that its target is precisely those regimes of truth established by apparatuses of security. The temporality of Benjamin's "now-time" is that of a *caesura* or halt to the secured risk-assessment of our future, which is to say the making of our future into a permanent present of evaluation and determination, what Heidegger might call the set up of a standing reserve. This Benjaminian political aesthetics would construe the singularity of a mass individual into multiple sites of tactical resistances to the technologies of security constitutive of the normalising programmes of our cities. De-signing would then constitute not a series of acts, potential or actualised, but rather something outside the field or agency of a labouring self, as a receptive openness to the mimetic correspondences of the human to the inorganic that is the belonging of our being to what is.